

## **The Effects of Pre-Arrival Services Provided by a Public, Research University Upon College Choice: International Students' Perspectives**

Jessica Pelfrey, Tristam Aldridge, Steve Kudika  
Clemson University  
[jpelfre@clemson.edu](mailto:jpelfre@clemson.edu)

Amber Sibley  
Ball State University

Following the events of September 11, 2001, the perception among foreign students from around the world is that the United States has become less welcoming to international students (Bollag, 2004a; Bollag, 2004b; Field, 2004). Given this negative perspective, institutions are scrambling to discover ways in which international student populations can be preserved. Most are "stepping up" recruitment efforts directed at foreign students by participating in overseas college fair tours and offering both merit and need-based scholarships (McMurtrie, 2005). Some universities have gone so far as to create international offices focused entirely on responding to foreign students' inquiries (McMurtrie, 2005). However, little or no literature, apart from one study conducted in Australia (Gomes & Murphy, 2003), indicated the potential affects of services provided to international students prior to their arrival in the United States upon college choice.

Historically, international student populations at American universities have increased each year (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2005). This trend continued until the end of the 2001-2002 academic year when the number of international students began to steadily decrease (IIE, 2005). Currently, 565,039 (239,212 undergraduate; 264,410 graduate; 61,417 other) international students (down 1.3% from the previous year) are attending American universities (IIE, 2005).

In addition to fostering globalization and facilitating cross-cultural development, international education is big business for US colleges and universities. International students studying in the United States during the 2004-2005 academic year contributed approximately \$13.29 billion (NAFSA, 2006a) to the US economy compared to \$12.87 billion (NAFSA, 2006b) the previous year. Furthermore, if academic institutions in the United States are to fulfill their missions, it is critical that international student enrollments be preserved. Institutions tend to benefit from foreign students who serve as teaching and research assistants (Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner, & Nelson, 1999). These students contribute knowledge and expertise while

creating a cross-cultural context that, in part, fulfills institutional cultural diversity goals (Peterson et al., 1999).

### *Services*

Services are usually provided for the purpose of meeting anticipated or known needs. Munoz and Munoz (2000) contend that little is known about the needs of international students. Their review of literature identified six assessments which were conducted with the goal of identifying needs of international students. These studies (Selvadurai, 1991; Howard & Keele, 1991; Arubayi, 1980; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1991; Eid & Jordan-Domschot, 1989; Deressa & Beavers, 1988, as cited in Munoz & Munoz, 2000) were published within the last two decades of the twentieth century. However, these studies only measured international students' perspectives of enrolled services provided by institutions. None of the studies assessed pre-arrival services provided to international students and only one study (Arubayi, 1980, as cited in Munoz & Munoz, 2000) distinguished between undergraduate and graduate students.

Although some research on the needs of international students and the services provided to this student sub-group has been conducted, most of the research is insufficient and quite limited in scope (Zhai, 2002). Zhao, Kuh, and Carini (2005) argue that if more is known about international student experiences, appropriate interventions can be made which would ultimately enhance the quality of education received by all students. Moreover, by gaining this information, educators will be able to prepare incoming international students to better handle the pressures they are likely to encounter (Zhai, 2002).

The purpose of this study was to assess international students' perspectives of pre-arrival services provided by a public, research university in the southeastern United States and to determine if these services influenced the students' decision to attend the institution. Therefore, do pre-arrival services provided by this university significantly impact international students' college decisions?

## Method

### *Participants*

This study focused on international students whose first semester of attendance at a public, research university located in the southeastern United States was the fall 2005. For the purpose of the study, international students were defined as any student indicating a country of citizenship other than the United States at the time the application for admission was submitted. Students currently possessing legal permanent residency in the United States were excluded. The student participants were identified using the university's data warehouse. The population (N=191) included both undergraduate and graduate students. Transfer students, defined as students attending a college or university inside the United States

immediately preceding the first semester of attendance at this institution, were also excluded from the study.

Ultimately, 34 students (64.71% male; 32.35% female; 2.94% unknown) participated in the study, yielding a 17.8% response rate. Though the majority of respondents were from India (47.06%), total participants represented 16 countries (Australia, Romania, Nigeria, Latvia, Zimbabwe, Thailand, Palestine, Spain, Vietnam, China, South Korea, Scotland, Canada, Germany, India, and Trinidad and Tobago). Most of the students possessed: F-1 (student) immigration status (76.47%); 17.65% were in J-1 (exchange student) status; 2.94% indicated an immigration status other than F-1, J-1, H-1 (temporary employment), H-4 (dependent of H-1), or L-2 (dependent of L-1); and 2.94% chose not to identify their current immigration status in the United States. The majority (76.47%) of participants were between the ages of 22 and 29 and slightly more than 76% (26) were graduate students. The top academic majors represented in the study were engineering (41.18%), business or economics (23.53%) and mathematics or science (11.76%).

### *Instrumentation*

Participants were surveyed with a Web-based instrument created by the authors using Blackboard, the university's course management system. The confidential survey identified students' gender, age, immigration status, educational level, academic major and country of origin. Students were asked to respond to 20 items pertaining to pre-arrival services using a four-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (see Appendix A-1).

### *Procedures*

One of the investigators, upon approval of the Institutional Review Board, created a work group in Blackboard using student user names. Students were sent an e-mail message requesting participation in the study. The e-mail explained the purpose of the study, assured students that responses were confidential and included instructions about accessing and completing the survey. Students only used their user name to access the survey. Though Blackboard allowed the investigator to identify students who completed the survey, the Web-based system did not allow responses to be connected to user names, thus ensuring the confidentiality of students' responses. Access to the survey was not permitted after submission. This system function enabled only one survey submission per student user ID.

Students received an e-mail with the content noted above requesting participation in the study on five of the six days to which access to the survey was permitted. The e-mails on day two and each subsequent day thereafter included a note of thanks directed to those who had already submitted the survey. The final e-mail informed students of the deadline for completing the survey after which survey results were calculated. A follow-up e-mail was sent to express appreciation for students' participation.

## Results

As previously stated, a four-point Likert scale questionnaire containing 20 items assessed students' satisfaction with pre-arrival services provided by the university. Percentages were calculated for each of the responses to the 20 items to determine students' degree of satisfaction with each (see Appendix A-1). Categorically, responses measured nine areas: marketing, admissions, finances, immigration, housing, academics, orientation, travel and arrival.

Overall, the respondents were pleased with the admissions process. More than 85% indicated that information on the university's Web site was easy to locate and over 88% believed the application process was clear and easy to follow. While students overwhelmingly felt university staff were knowledgeable about the admissions process (97.1%), fewer agreed that they received timely responses to their questions regarding the same process (73.6%). These issues of "timing" regarding admissions services were the only items with which students indicated some dissatisfaction in the admissions category (see Appendix A-1).

Timing was also an issue regarding immigration matters. Students agreed that immigration services staff provided timely responses to their immigration questions (82.4%). However, 38.2% did not believe that immigration documents were provided in a timely manner, particularly in comparison to the amount of time other colleges delivered the same documents.

Not surprisingly, given the recent focus of institutional recruitment strategies upon offering scholarships and financial aid to international students (McMurtrie, 2005), 44.1% wished more information about assistantships and other forms of financial aid had been provided. Nonetheless, over 70% agreed that they obtained information about payment of university tuition and fees prior to their arrival. This result is intriguing since 61.8% said no orientation to the university had been provided prior to their arrival.

Many respondents (58.9%) were also satisfied with travel information provided by the university. Over 82% expressed confidence about what to expect upon arrival at a United States port of entry. While 67.6% of students indicated that they were not greeted at the airport by a university representative (student/staff/faculty), the same percentage indicated that they knew where to go upon arrival on campus. However, 58.8% did not credit campus signage as the source which directed them to the appropriate location for check-in.

Approximately 59% of students did not believe they were adequately informed about the university's academic system (terminology, class structure, curriculum requirements,

English language requirements and methods of instruction). Overall, nearly 65% of respondents felt the services provided by the university successfully oriented them to the campus. Finally, the results of the study demonstrated that international students were, for the most part, satisfied with the pre-arrival services provided by the university. Regardless, a majority (53%) indicated their college decision was not significantly influenced by the services which were provided.

## Discussion

Due to the absence of data assessing pre-arrival services provided to international students (Munoz & Munoz, 2000; Zhai, 2002), the authors chose not to formulate a working hypothesis to predict the outcomes of the assessment. In turn, one could have assumed due to the recent decline in international student enrollments and the increase in institutional recruitment efforts (McMurtrie, 2005) that the services provided to international students prior to their arrival could positively affect students' college decisions. More than half of the participants (53%) in this study indicated that the services did not (see Appendix A-1). It is, however, likely that the results of this assessment could be used to improve the services provided to international students by this particular university as well as other institutions. Zhao, Kuh, & Carini (2005) seemed to agree by pointing out the importance of college administrators knowing more about this student sub-group population for the purpose of improving the quality of the educational experience for all students.

Clearly, limitations of this study prevent the results from being broadly applied. In fact, because only 34 students participated in the study (a return rate of 17.8%) and no comparative data of previous years exists, the results of this study cannot even be generalized to the institution in the study. The gender imbalance (64.71% male; 32.35% female; 2.94% unknown) in the study should also be controlled or accounted for in future studies. While 16 countries were represented in the study, students from India dominated responses. A broader representation is needed to identify potential factors unique to particular countries or regions of the world. Because most of the students possessing J-1 immigration status at this university tend to be non-degree, exchange students, the services provided to this category of students differs from those provided to students entering the United States in F-1 immigration status. Future investigators at this institution might wish to separate responses based upon immigration status to prevent skewed results.

## Conclusion

Since the decline in international student enrollments at American universities is a recent phenomenon (IIE, 2005), it remains to be seen precisely how and the extent to which institutions will react. Regardless, it would be wise for international student offices to assess

students' satisfaction with the services provided to them prior to their arrival. If for no other reason, the information would provide clear evidence to guide changes and adjustments to institutional services being extended. Given the fiscal (NAFSA, 2006a; NAFSA 2006b), diversity (Peterson et al., 1999) and even national security benefits (Kless, 2004) of international education to the United States, failure to effectively service international students could render undesirable affects (NAFSA, 2003).

## References

- Bollag, B. (2004a). Enrollment of foreign students drops in US [Electronic version]. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 51(13), A1.
- Bollag, B. (2004b). Wanted: Foreign students [Electronic version]. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 51(7), A37.
- Field, K. (2004). Fixing the visa quagmire [Electronic version]. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 51(7), A40.
- Gomes, L., & Murphy, J. (2003). An exploratory study of marketing international education online. *The International Journal of Educational Management*, 17(3), 116-125.
- Kless, S. H. (2004). We threaten national security by discouraging the best and brightest students from abroad [Electronic version]. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 51(7), B9.
- Institute of International Education, Open Doors. (2005). *Open doors 2005 fast facts*. Retrieved August 11, 2006, from [http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/file\\_depot/0-10000000/010000/3390/folder/48524/FastFacts2005.pdf](http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/file_depot/0-10000000/010000/3390/folder/48524/FastFacts2005.pdf)
- McMurtrie, B. (2005). American universities step up their sales pitch overseas [Electronic version]. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 51(23), A8.
- Munoz, M.D., & Munoz, M.A. (2000). Needs assessment in a higher education environment: international student programs. (Report No. HE035431). University of Louisville. (ERIC Document Reproduction Services No. ED470029)
- NAFSA: Association of International Educators. (2003, May 1). *Toward and international education policy for the United States: International education in an age of globalism and terrorism*. Retrieved November 13, 2005, from [http://www.nafsa.org/public\\_policy.sec/united\\_states\\_international/toward\\_an\\_international](http://www.nafsa.org/public_policy.sec/united_states_international/toward_an_international).
- NAFSA: Association of International Educators. (2006a). *The economic benefits of international education to the United States for the 2004-2005 academic year: A statistical analysis*. Retrieved January 28, 2006, from [http://www.nafsa.org/\\_/File/\\_eis2005/usa.pdf](http://www.nafsa.org/_/File/_eis2005/usa.pdf)
- NAFSA: Association of International Educators. (2006b). *The economic benefits of international education to the United States for the 2003-2004 academic year: A statistical analysis*. Retrieved August 30, 2006, from [http://www.nafsa.org/\\_/File/\\_](http://www.nafsa.org/_/File/_)

usa.pdf

- Peterson, D. M., Briggs, P., Dreasher, L., Horner, D. D., & Nelson, T. (1999). Contributions of international students and programs to campus diversity. *New Directions for Student Services*, 86, 67-77. Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Zhai, L. (2002). Studying international students: adjustment issues and social support. San Diego, CA: Office of International Research. (ERIC Document Reproduction Services No. ED474481)
- Zhao, C., Kuh, G. D., & Carini, R. M. (2005). A comparison of international student and American student engagement in effective educational practices. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 76, 209-231.

## Appendix

Question:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Unanswered
<b>Admissions</b>					
Admission information on the university's website was easy to locate.	20.6	64.7	14.7	0	0
The application process was clearly published and easy to follow.	35.4	52.9	8.8	0	2.9
I received timely responses to my queries regarding the admissions process.	35.4	38.2	23.5	0	2.9
University staff were knowledgeable about admissions and enrollment procedures.	50	47.1	0	0	2.9
I received timely notification of the admissions decision.	35.4	35.3	17.6	8.8	2.9
<b>Financial</b>					
Information about financial aid / assistantship opportunities was clearly provided.	17.7	35.3	38.2	5.9	2.9
I obtained information about payment of university tuition and fees prior to my arrival.	29.4	41.2	20.6	5.9	2.9
<b>Marketing</b>					
Brochures, pamphlets or other information materials about the university were helpful to me during the college selection process.	8.9	55.9	29.4	2.9	2.9
<b>Immigration</b>					
I received my I-20 or DS-2019 in a timely manner in comparison to other US colleges to which I applied.	35.4	23.5	20.6	17.6	2.9
I received timely responses to my questions regarding immigration matters.	29.5	52.9	11.8	2.9	2.9
<b>Housing</b>					
I received helpful information about housing options available at the university.	23.6	38.2	29.4	5.9	2.9
<b>Academic</b>					
I was informed about the university's academic system (terminology, class structure, curriculum requirements, English language requirements, method of instruction, etc.) prior to my arrival.	14.8	23.5	38.2	20.6	2.9
<b>Orientation</b>					
An orientation to the university was provided prior to my arrival.	11.8	23.5	41.2	20.6	2.9
Overall, the services provided by the university prior to my arrival successfully oriented me to the campus.	14.7	50	26.5	5.9	2.9
<b>Travel</b>					
Information about traveling to the university was provided prior to my arrival.	17.7	41.2	29.4	8.8	2.9
<b>Arrival</b>					
A campus representative (student/staff/faculty) greeted me upon my arrival at the airport.	20.7	8.8	14.7	52.9	2.9
I knew what to expect upon arrival at the US port of entry.	26.5	55.9	5.9	8.8	2.9
I knew where to go when I arrived on campus.	17.6	50	20.6	8.9	2.9
Signs on campus directed me to the appropriate campus location(s) for check-in.	11.8	26.5	38.2	20.6	2.9
<b>Conclusion</b>					
The services provided by the university significantly influenced my decision to attend.	8.8	35.3	41.2	11.8	2.9